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1908

POEMS

W. E. B. HENDERSON

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POEMS

POEMS

BY

W. E. B. HENDERSON

LONDON

KEGAN PAUL, TRENCH, TRÜBNER & CO., LTD.

1908

TURNEBULL AND SPEARS, PRINTERS, EDINBURGH

PR

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TO E. A. H.

*As one by one, in leisure hours,
I plucked my weeds, you called them flowers :
And each its drooping head did raise,
Drinking the water of your praise.
But now at last my faltering hand
Has bound them with Hope's golden strand.
The knot is fast : so, dearest, take
And wear the posy for my sake.*

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RENUNCIATION

I

DAWN

DAWN, dawn at last ! from God's red lids of cloud
Heavy with weeping for the agony
Of me, His creature, His Great Eye looks forth
Wan through a mist of tears upon the world.

Dawn ! cold and grey and desolate of hope,
Dawn palely issuing from the womb of Night
Cold as a babe still-born—and yet I live,
Though 'tis Death's hour, and in full tide flows on
His River : see how silently it glides
Past all those weeping figures on the marge.
Ah God, that I might sink into the flood
With one long sigh of uttermost content
As the dark waters kissed above my head—
For now I know that she and I must part.

The knowledge came so swift, so quietly,
Not with wild surge and inrush on the soul
Of seething thought, mad impulse slain at birth

Toward violence or self-murder—nay, not that—
Rather I *knew*, and in my depths a string
Snapped, then a moment quivered and was still.
That music will be mute for ever more.

It was the string on which she used to play,
Her touch alone drew out such harmonies
As my poor soul might yield. But He, the stern
Master Musician deemed her music ill—
So fine His ear—and let His wrath flash out
And sudden plucked the string with petulant hand
And brake it. . . . Wherefore God, that string alone?
Ah wherefore did'st Thou leave the instrument
To linger useless on, barren of sound?
No loving Father Thou, but, as of old,
Jehovah gorged with blood of sacrifice,
Devising this supremest cruelty
To leave me life, yet rob me of my love.
“Thou shalt not”—aye forbidding all of sweet
To us on earth—Ah me, we were so near
Our Eden, she and I. “A jealous God”—
Sending Thine Angel with the Flaming Sword
Lest we should enter in and be as gods
In our own heaven, more glorious far than Thine.
And I, poor fool, thought thou did'st weep for me
But now. . . . Peace, peace, break off! my words
are wild,
For Marah’s flood hath swept away the bounds
Thy hand hath set ’twixt Truth and Blasphemy.

Back, back to that child's groping after light,
That stumbling down Life's path, before she came
And took my hand and led me straitly on,
And half her burden on my back she cast
To lighten mine; and even as we fared
Onward, with that dark shadow 'twixt us twain—
Shadow of him by church and forms of law
Licenced her body's lord—a sudden light
Flashed in our path, and yawning at our feet
A gulf . . . she shuddering saw and understood,
And each in other's eyes the unspoken thought
Read: in one moment all the years rushed by—
I heard them. . . . When eternities had passed
She, smiling wanly, spake. “Thus far, my friend,
No further. You and I have deemed the path
Sweet, but our ways branch off to left and right
Henceforth,”—the sweet lips quivered, and the smile
Froze, and her eyes, twin worlds of misery
Dulled by the mist and haze of unshed tears
Stabbed me, and that death-pallor of her face . . .
And then half mad with passion and with ruth
I grasped her wrist's white circle, and she shrank
And thinned her lips in pain, and glancing down
I saw that devil's thumb mark . . . quickly she,
“When he . . . you know . . . he cannot judge
his strength
At all times.” Then—Ah God, the madness rose
And in my passion's surging torrent and rush

Will, judgment, honour, swift as autumn leaves
 Sucked downward, vanished in the eddy and swirl.
 Fiercely I clasped her, and on eyes, lips, hair
 Rained wild, delirious kisses . . . then released
 She for a space, as blinded by the storm,
 Stood with shut eyes, lips parting : then she sank
 Hiding her face and wept--no easy tears
 But dreadful, strangling sobs that from her depths
 Struggled with piteous travail. For a space
 I stood in torment while they racked her frame.
 At last she fought them down, and rising, turned
 Wild hopeless eyes, her bosom like a sea
 Yet heaving after storm. "This is the end—"
 Hope died within me as I heard her voice
 So strange, remote, aloof—"Tis o'er, my friend,
 This masquerade of Love in Friendship's garb.
 Not while he lives . . . Farewell."

E'en as she spake
 She faltered, and, her face suffused with shame,
 Flung tense, rebellious arms about my neck,
 And in the misty splendour of her eyes
 I read "Ah, leave me not."

She heard a sound
 Or seemed to hear, and thrust me from her side—
 "Go now—to-morrow !" and her glorious eyes
 Were bright with guilty promise . . .

At the gate
 I stood aside : he passed, her chosen lord,

Her husband—Blood of Christ ! He saw me not,
But with glazed eye and slurring satyr-tread
Passed on. Her wrist——! “ He cannot judge his
strength
At all times.” . . . When the blood-mist from mine
eyes
Had rolled, and those strange lights and thunderings,
I woke, and found him gone : and stupidly
Marvelled I had not slain him ere he bore
The reek of wine and infidelity
To her pure presence. . . . Ah, the mist once more
Blood-red, with wild pulsations in the brain.
Then with tense fingers twitching for his throat
Homeward I strode ; one thought so strangely clear
Stood out : that I should slay him on the morn.
Long time I lay and tossed upon my couch,
And e'er with calm insistence urged a Voice
“ Kill,” and the hours, teeming with fancies wild,
Dragged toward the dawn, till at the last I slept
And then—this trance, this vision of the night !

I dreamed that with slow step and measured tread
I paced the shadowy pathways of Romance :
On either side a shrouded Majesty
Possessed my hand, and ever led me on
Unwavering, and I knew,—as we in dreams
Know,—they were Love and Honour : silently
We fared through misty regions of the dead

Onward and ever on, and in our wake
Swelled a dull, wailing cry of tortured souls.
I felt Love's fingers tighten over mine :
He turned, and in deep tones, made musical
By some immortal sorrow, " These are they
That in their mortal life have loved as thou,
Yet sinned as thou hast not, save in thy thought.
Thou shalt not see these pale, unhappy wraiths
That, walking the lowlier pathways of the world,
Drugged deep their aching hearts with guilty love,
And, waking, sought again the numbing draught
To drown in wild delirium of the sense
The low, insistent whisperings of the soul——
Not these——but they that vaunted pride of place,
That grasped in life the sceptre, bare the crown,
They that for guilty passion ventured all——
Passion that sways an empire, wrecks a throne,
High in its own fierce heaven, mocking at hell."

He ceased, and led me onward : in our wake
The wailing died to silence, all the air
The memory of a cry. Great wastes of land
Virgin of life we passed, and, faring on,
Entered a forest: gloom and solemn hush
Reigned, and o'erhead thick, interlacing boughs
Fraught with strange menace roofed us from the sky,
Nor song of birds,——nor leaf on any tree
Danced, but dead calm weighed down the prisoned
air.

Then on the silence brake “ Broceliande ! ”
In Love’s hushed whisper, “ Here he sleeps away
That baleful-glorious draught of scarlet fire,
The nectar of the lips of Nimiie.
Hearest thou not the intake and the thrust
Of that sweet faëry breath she breathed in him ?
List—yet again ! ” He ceased, and from afar
The measured sigh and whisper of soft breath,
Taken in sleep, fell gently on mine ear.
“ Here by a magic mightier than his own——
Hot, frenzied kisses from a wanton mouth——
Conquered he lies—not slain, but wrapped in trance
Till all false love be blotted from the world.
Then shall he rise and wield his spells again.”
Love paused, and Honour, turning on his face
Sad, wrathful eyes, swift spake “ All, all was lost
Through thee : the piled up wisdom of long years,
The garnered magic, hoarded with slow art
Through all his hundred winters in a trice
Lay in the hollow of a wanton’s hand :
Thou tak’st rich fuel to feed thine altar flame ! ”
To whom the first “ Not love, but wild desire
Was theirs. Ah, know’st thou not that without
thee
I am not Love, but baseness ? Let us hence,
We are so near those two that wrongly loved
In that far western land so long ago.
Onward.”

Love laid a hand upon my brow,
And dark and darker loomed Broceliande,
Vanished, and on a sudden lo ! I stood
High on a rugged headland, and was 'ware
Of the low moaning of a faëry sea
That with soft crooning kisses lipped its base.
And high above us, fronting on the main,
A castle : lofty battlements and towers
Sombre, aloof, austere against the sky
Stood out with darkling menace : o'er the sea
A golden pathway from the dying sun
Stretched to the land, and quivered like some live thing
With flickering undulations. I was 'ware
Of a tall ship, her sails all sunset-flushed,
That clave the dancing gold, and at the prow
A warrior robed in fire, whose burning eyes
Strained toward the castle.

Love upon my arm
Laid a light hand, and whispered "Let thine eyes
Follow his gaze." I looked and I beheld
Framed in a casement sunset-flushed, a face
Of wild, proud beauty crowned by hair of night,
And two dark wondrous eyes that swept the main.
Then swift a blinding glory o'er her face
Flashed, and the brooding eyes, awak'd from sleep
By some fierce, sudden joy, leapt into flame,
And from such lips as lure the souls of men
Brake a low cry of "Tristram!"

At the sound

Love raised a hand, and all was lost in mist,
Erased by swift dream-changes . . . and I stood
Ever with Love and Honour at my side
In a vast chamber, richly stored with gear
And on the walls fair hangings. Nigh the door
A couch, whereon she lay, whose loveliness
Shone o'er the sea : without a distant step
Louder and louder through long galleries
Grew on the sense. She heard, and from the couch
With one lithe movement leapt, and, deathly pale,
Swaying and shaking with the passion-storm
That swept her nigh to a swoon, uncertainly
Moved toward the door : 'twas on the instant flung
Wide, and her warrior from the gilded main
Flashed on her sudden, dominant, supreme.
I hear her gasp and intake of swift breath,
Then with a cry they twain, like meeting waves,
Fused into one, and after that wild cry
Silence . . . it was so terrible to hear
That passion-silence . . . but it came at last——
Their lips reluctant parting——and they stood
With drinking eyes that never took their fill.
Then sudden she, quite simply, like a child
O'erwearied, laid her head upon his breast.
And stooping he, as one that plucks a flower,
Swung her aloft and held her, pasturing
With hovering kisses on her eyes, lips, brow,

And in his arms, the limit of her world,
So meek she lay——that dark imperious Queen——
Making surrender, sweeter for the pride
That barred it from all others. In his arms
He bare her to the couch, whereon they sate
And then at last he found that he could speak.
“ Isolde, my star, my glory, my white flower,
Breathing thy heady fragrance till the brain
Reels, and the eyes are dim——” he could no
more

But in her lips’ red wonder merged his voice.
Softly she sighed, then, turning on his rapt face
The tender, upward triumph of her smile,
Brake forth in music, “ Tristram of Lyonesse !
My Tristram ! I am thine so utterly !
Thy flower, thou say’st ? If such indeed am I,
O thou, my sun, shine out in all thy strength,
Draw forth my perfume with one flaming kiss
Till all the fragrance hoarded from the world
Rise up, like incense, to my own soul’s god ! ”
She paused, the vibrant passion of her voice
Trembling to silence ; then with languorous grace
Tossed o’er his neck a loop of fragrant hair
Drawing him down, and all mock-wrathfully
Flashed out “ Unknightly ! Fifty times my heart
Hath beat since last it rioted on thine.
Ere this thou might’st have kissed me fifty times.
I do not lightly bear such negligence.

O dastard knight, an thou dost fly the lists
This rope shall hale thee."

Once again her mood
Changed, and low murmuring, that I scarce could
hear,

She panted "Tristram, fold me in thine arms
Close—close——Ah, how I yearn for the sweet pain
Numb'd, breathless, swooning —— Oh, to meet
death thus

Crushed in thine arms—my heart at thy lips' touch
Maddened——then stilled by that last passion-clasp."

He for a space a quivering silence held,
Then all his soul burst forth in frenzied speech
"Isolde! Isolde! Queen of the flaming West,
Sea of the surging river of my blood,
Mine! Mine, by the sting and fire of that deep
draught

That hurled us each on other. O my rose,
Flaunting the riotous splendour of thy bloom,
The stealing exhalations of thy soul
Circle me round with sweetness, and I yield,
Swept in by the eddying whirlwind of desire.
O radiant, thronèd Queen of Tournament,
For thee, for thee I thundered through the lists,
Mad with the lust for glory in thine eyes,
Drunk with the crash and hum of splintering swords.
And lances flashing fire on riven helms
Till I could shout for joy of the battle-blare,

All, all to barter blood and wounds and death
To win thine eyes' quick flash, that deeper smile
Pregnant with promise of the after sweet.
Isolde, that night we first began to live,
That night upon the ship ! Thou dost recall ?
The great deep shimmering 'neath a summer moon,
And that faint trembling of the silvered sails
Fanned by the soft breath of the sleeping wind.”
Then shuddering she, “ Recall ! when my whole
soul
Rebelled—! A bride for Mark, the Cornish King !
For him, for him whose name to heaven's four winds
Stank in men's nostrils ! Thou of all the world
Mine escort to that mockery !”

Swift he spake,

“ No more of Mark in this first hour of joy,
Isolde, Isolde, that night upon the sea
We drained the maddening philtre of desire ;
How swift the magic wrought upon our blood—
Thy sudden step—the pause—thy hungry eyes
Blazing with new-born splendour of desire,
And then——oblivion. . . . Coldly brake the dawn,
Dim through the mist Tintagel reared her towers.
And thou Mark's bride—O wonder of the West !
What reck we twain of Mark, thy dastard lord ?
O pale enchantress with thy dreaming lakes
Of sombre passion, thus—in one long kiss
I drown thought, memory, speech !”

A silence fell,

Then Honour clave the stillness in low tones
Poignant with some celestial bitterness,
“ Was it for this he wore his knighthood’s flower,
For this he graced the tourney, bare the prize,
Crashing resistless through the glittering field ?—
Strength, honour, manhood—all to sate the lust
Of an imperial wanton——?”

With sad eyes

Love answered, “ Friend, the shame not thine alone,
For by this draught unhallowed and profane .
I too was wronged, degraded, desecrate
Of sweet unforc’d surrender, soul to soul.
And yet we twain by one that knew us not
Fouly avenged—— Behold ! ”

Behind the couch

A sliding portal oped its stealthy lips,
And two small eyes, sunk in a swarthy face,
Narrowed their baleful glitter on the couch.
And with slow, soundless patience, inch by inch,
The fissure yawned to measure of a man,
And in his hand the glint of naked steel,
Tense, watchful, silent toward the couch he crept,
Then stooped and grasping Tristram by the hair
Drave the swift-diving steel from neck to throat . . .
And then with dreadful smile and glittering eyes
On the dead shoulder propped a mocking face,
Seized the dead wrists, guiding the puppet hands

To blind caressing of her rigid face,
And all in silence——silence . . . then—Ah God,
The awful, mirthless laugh that from her lips
Brake at the groping hands! . . .

Then darkness fell.

At last from the blind confusion of my dream,
Formless, chaotic——shapes that went and came,
Unhappy shadows flitting to and fro——
A veil was lifted, and forth shone the world——
A new dream-country warm with breath of May.
And with the twain, my shrouded sentinels,
I stood. On either hand a grove of pines,
Still, silent——watchful of the rising sun.
And with the stifled voice of one that sleeps
A brook drowsed murmuring onward : over all
The hush'd expectancy of summer dawn.
A woman's voice ! Tender and rich and full ;
A low sweet snatch of haunting melody
Sank in a flitting sigh.

Skirting the bend

Of those massed pines——dark warriors of the wood,
Tense, upright, motionless in battle-square——
There came two riding : swift the infant sun
Danced on the gleaming bridles. Radiant she
With soft, ethereal loveliness ; her hair
Streamed rippling down, her palfrey's milky flank
Hid by a fragrant cloud of glorying gold.

But through the troubled beauty of her eyes
A soul, self-warring, looked upon the world.
And he, that other, dark and proud of mien
Save for the eyes' quick sweetening as they turned
On her that rode beside him.

At her words

“Here let us rest, Sir Lancelot—” swiftly they
Dismounting captive made the willing steeds,
And on the dead breast of a stricken pine
Sate, and a silence fell betwixt the twain.
She on her hand's clenched pallor cushioning
As pale a cheek, with drear, unseeing eyes
Groped through the thickening twilight of her
thoughts.

Till one, it seemed, e'en darklier than the rest
Stood forth, and drove her shuddering back to earth.
Then wearily she raised her head and spake.
“Another day! Once more the eternal sun
Toils toward his sheer omnipotence in heaven.
Peace o'er the world! unutterable peace——
Save in my bosom——”

He with troubled eyes
Questioned her brooding face. “Weary, my
Queen?”

“Weary!” She turned. “I think there was a time—
So long ago——I since have fared so far
Its wake hath dimmed and faded utterly
From my life's ocean——when I looked on Peace,

Knew her my sister, housed her in my breast,
 And now—the silent conflict day by day,
 And in the long night-watches ere the dawn
 The builded self-deceptions, questionings
 Dim, fruitless, unavailing—”

Suddenly

She paused, as one mistrustful of her power
 To check her heart's wild uprush into speech
 Through the drawn sluice, yet something in her tone
 He caught, and spake, trembling exceedingly,
 “I too have known long nights of sleep forlorn,
 Ah, must I fight the current evermore,
 Never to turn, committing weary limbs
 To the swift rush of waters toward the sea——?”
 “Thou too——!”——so faint her voice——
 “then . . .”

Inch by inch

The eyes of each lured other: brokenly
 He whispered, “Drifting—drifting toward the sea,
 My sea——!”

Dead silence, as their ranging souls
 Brake prison bars, indissolubly merged,
 Shaming the tardier meeting of their lips
 As tremblingly she swayed into his kiss. . . .

Her eyes were misty stars as waveringly
 Each from the other drew. A little space
 They nursed the new-found glory: then at last

He roused himself and spake : “ My Guinevere !
 At last ! so near to this a thousand times
 We twain have hovered——touch of hand or glance
 Given and ta'en, and I could see thy soul
 Lean from her casement, fluttering as for flight,
 Yet fear to spread her wings.”

’Twixt reverent hands

He framed her face, transfigured by his kiss
 To glory not of earth, then backward drew
 In awe, as one that gazes on a saint,
 “ O starry splendour searing through my soul——
 Guinevere ! Guinevere, unto thee the world
 Hath yielded up her store of loveliness !
 The rose hath spilled her heart upon thy cheek,
 Thou in the westering sun hast bathed thy hair
 And drawn it glistening forth for my delight.
 The winds have kissed away the golden tears,
 The flowers have breathed in it that flow and ebb
 Of faint, beleaguered fragrance. O my Queen,
 Thy spirit hovers brooding o'er the world.
 The trees, wind-swept to shuddering litanies,
 Moan forth thy name, murmuring “ Guinevere ! ”
 To the rapt stars. O throb and pulse of me,
 O storm and spate upsurging o'er my soul
 Drown me for ever ! ”

Passion-stunned she gazed
 A while, then that swift, realising flash
 Leapt, blurring, o'er the glory. “ Lancelot,

So long ago, I knew this hour was nigh,
 And now 'tis here, and yet——Ah, Mother of
 Heaven!

How oft my lips have prayed it might not come,
 And all the while I knew yet would not know
 My heart's wild yearning for it: hope and dread
 Waging their ceaseless war on my soul's field.
 And now my own true knight——"divinely shone
 Her eyes' sad tenderness——"we twain have met
 And greeted—and we *know*——"then falteringly,
 "No more we twain—alone—while yet he lives,
 Arthur—my lord——"

——She paused, and I was 'ware
 Of Love's ruth-laden eyes bended on me,
 "Her words to thee!" he whispered——

At the name

Of Arthur swift the glory died away
 From Lancelot's eyes: dumbly he turned aside
 Bowing his head, and drear the silence closed
 Around. With lightning swiftness o'er my brain
 Remembrance flashed of their sad history
 Dimming mine eyes with tears, yet through the mist
 Swift to her face I marked the conscious tide
 Surge, then that sculptured pallor with the ebb——
 I heard her strangled "Arthur!", turning saw
 A rider clad in steel: his vizor up
 Bared to the breeze a face of kingly mould
 Lit by such eyes as thrall the wills of men,

Leading through fear to reverence and love.
Slipping to earth, he came whereas they sate,
But ere the speech could leap from eyes to lips
The Queen upsprang, and, tripping in tremulous
haste,
Had fall'n, but Lancelot, swifter than the King,
Diving had caught her wrist with steadyng hands.
Then to the Queen slow turning spake her lord.
“ No hurt—? we owe much thanks to Lancelot
That his the pain, not thine.”

With wondering eyes

He answered, “ Pain, my liege ? what hurt to me
To save the Queen from hurt ? ” To whom the King
With rippled brow, “ No pain ! well pleased am I
One night hath poured such balm upon thy wound.
Thou hast forgot we twain on yester eve
Spake of this joust, new spent from which I come,
And thou didst crave my leave to stand aside
For that some wound, ta'en in an idle tilt,
Had bound thine arm fast prisoner to thy flank—
All this in the gathering gloom of yester eve.”
He paused—unanswered : then he spake once more,
The voice was ill to hear—“ May all thy wounds
Be healed with equal haste.” Then Lancelot
Compelled some vague reply from smiling lips,
But flushed his cheek with anger, and his eyes,
Hard, sunless, watchful, sought the King’s, and fell.
They stood—those three—in silence.

At the last

Spake Arthur. “Let us hence,”—so chill his voice
 And toneless—silently they gat to horse
 And, she that was to part them evermore
 Riding between, in silence passed away
 Each to eternal infelicity.

“Thou hast beheld the sowing of the seed
 Now shalt thou view the harvest”—

Solemnly

Love’s voice tolled in upon my reverie.
 ‘Enough !’ I cried, remembering all their woe,
 ‘Rack me no more !’

But Love with tender eyes,

“My Master bare the Passion and the Cross,
 And wilt thou quail even to look on death
 For thy soul’s health—the soul He died to save ?
 Ask me no more, for thou must see the end.”
 He raised a hand and once again the mist
 Blotted the world. . . .

A garden hedged around—

With ancient walls mellowed by eating time,
 Low crumbling roofs crowned with majestic towers,
 Grey guardians of the immemorial peace
 That in the cool, unfluctuating air
 Lay brooding—then I saw !

There in the midst
 He stood with pleading eyes and suppliant hands

In agony I turned aside
Clinging to Love, "No more, Ah Christ, no more!
Mercy!" His eyes were soft with holy light
And then. . . .

A barren headland by the sea—
Wild waste of waters and a dying sun
And at my side a Figure. “Love!” I cried,
Some keener suffering for a tortured soul—?
Deep stillness! then with tenderness divine
The answer, “It is finished. Go thy way.”
I heard the voice, I saw the wounded palm
Uplifted, and I *knew* . . .

Then over all
Confusion, void, a shuddering back to life,
A drear and alien dawn. . . .

II

EVENING

Tis o'er—that latest meeting—she and I—
So strange: no more to greet her as of old—
The speaking handclasp, eloquent of all
The lips would leave unuttered—tender eyes
Of revelation: ne'er again to pluck
In easeful commune half the tangled skeins
From out Life's web: no more to sit, we two,
In sweet, according silence, redolent
Of her soul's perfume through the word withheld.
Ah, that sweet merchandise of glance for glance,
Barter of words, fair interchange of thought,
And then—the o'erwhelming thunder-crash of sense,
The lightning passion searing to the root.
Our mellowing comradeship to bear no more
The perfect fruit. And now the storm hath passed
That lashed us bare alike of hope and guilt.

So strange, so calm, that stupor of farewell——
She rose, an alien sweetness in her eyes,
Sad presage—then her voice came low and clear,
“Speak not, my friend. I see it in your face.
Quickly were best——”

. . . a strand of her dark hair
Strayed from the mass: an inch—? nay, less: a touch

Would smoothe it back . . . that pendant at her
breast,
A pearl was lost—the tiny fangs of gold
Curved o'er a void . . .

—“we will not meet again
While he . . . farewell—go quickly.”

Tenderly

Her lips' cold benediction on my brow
Fell—and I woke beneath the incurious stars.

Two shattered lives groping their way toward death,
Two souls laid quivering on Thine altar flame,
O God of Judgment, art thou satisfied ?

SARAH

SUNSET ! and all the West incarnadined——
Behold ! the glow hath glorified, illumed
The features of my babe, the gift of God !

Sunset ! *My sun hath risen in mine age :*
I, Sarah, barren fourscore years and ten
Have born a child to Abraham my lord.

Sunset and afterglow ! It is the hour
When happy mothers croon their babes to rest ;
—Ah God ! my bitter hour in days of old,
When night was closing in upon the world,
And slowly to my wild and tearless eyes
The eternal hills were mingled with the clouds,
And all became one blackness of despair
To me, the childless woman : all the day
A ceaseless hunger gnawed about my heart,
But, when the day was dying, surged in me
So vast a tide of fury at my wrongs
That I would drive my nails into the palm
And plunge my prisoning teeth upon the lip
That trembled to blaspheme against the Lord

Who laid His grievous curse upon my womb.
And she—the Egyptian ! Yet do I behold
In dreams the maddening flash of those dark eyes
Alight with mocking triumph—she, the slave
Rich in the natural treasures of her kind,
While I, her mistress . . . Ah ! I marvel yet
That in full blast of passion I could hold
These agéd, trembling fingers from their lust
To span the swarthy circle of her throat
And crush the double life !

But peace, my soul !

Now is her hour of triumph over-past,
For I to Abraham have born a son,
I who in scornful bitterness of heart
Laughed at the promise of the Most High God,
Who in His infinite pity of my shame
Forebore to strike me lifeless, but fulfilled
His glorious promise in the babe my son,
Mine Isaac, mine, mine by the pangs of Eve,
Mine, the late offspring of this withered flesh,
The fruit of that sad woman who would fold
The babes of happier sisters to her breast,
Till in the mother's eye she read a glance
Of half-exultant pity . . . silently
Surrendering the load of sinless flesh
That all the frenzied yearning of my life
Had made mine own in fancy, I would creep
Away to brood on my fast-fading youth,

Pregnant with dreadful tears that would not flow.
So strong was this obsession of my grief
That oft, e'en now, when sleep obscures my joy,
Unwillingly I re-create the past
And once again am childless in my dreams.
Ah me, that lightning terror, ere the brain
Can rise triumphant o'er the mists of sleep,
The moment's anguish while I stretch wild hands
Through the black night—each hair-breadth of their
course

Increasing agony—until they rest
On him my babe, my treasure, warm with sleep.
Ah ! how I seize and strain him to my breast,
Load him with such fierce kisses that my frame
Shakes with the vehemence of my feasting lips.
He wakens, and the soft caressing touch
Of tiny fingers ranging round my breast
Flings wide the flood-gates of my swelling heart,
And I who, childless, knew not how to weep,
Find blessed solace in a mother's tears.

Alas ! this loving kindness of the Lord,
This joy, this pride and crown of womanhood,
Is but the dying splendour of mine end, .
The transient glory of my fading hour
Ere I am lost in everlasting night.
My life has but begun when I must die,
I, who would fain lead Isaac by the hand

Far up the ascending pathway of his life,
Am stayed by death, denied by destiny.
And yet I need not fear for thee, my son,
Thou hast found favour in the eyes of God :
For solemnly to thy father Abraham
He sware, “ In Isaac shall thy seed be called,”
And richly shall thy manhood yield increase,
Yea, from thy loins a people shall arise,
A nation of the seed of Abraham.
I in mine age am chosen of the Lord,
I, Sarah, late a scorn and a reproach,
To bear at last to Abraham a son,
Potential father of unnumbered hosts,
Whose swelling tribes shall inundate the world.

LOVE'S PROGRESS

I

How fresh and fair the morn
That greets mine eyes yet laden with the dew
Of that deep sleep which follows weary hours
Of rest forlorn.

Striving to see the face
That flitted on the horizon of the mind :
Then, as I thought to fix it, sank below,
Leaving no trace.

Then sudden rose again,
And hung elusive, troubling my repose ;
Sweet face, I know not what you bring to me,
Pleasure or pain.

Last night when first I met
Those eyes, my heart stood emptied of its blood,
Then bounded on in riot, close allied
To pain . . . and yet

To me it seems so strange,
On yester morn I heard the self-same thrush,
Breathed the same air earth-scented . . . yet the
world
Hath suffered change.

II

Can it be that she likes me,
Am I faint-heart? over-bold?
Now she appears to be gracious,
Now to be courtly and cold.
How may I read the riddle that lies
Unrevealed by her eyes?

Thrice have I felt her sweet presence
Thrill me with joy and with pain,
Sympathy seemed to be wakened—
Was it a trick of the brain
Summoning Hope, and fanning her fire
With the breath of desire?

III

To-day I shall see her,
Clasp her hand in mine,
And, spite the formal utterance
Which Use demands, shall meet that glance
Which fires the blood like wine.

Oh deep dark wells of mystery,
Is she untouched, heart-whole ?
Ah, what if it should only be
Her perfect, woman's courtesy,
Index of her sweet soul.

IV

June is here and the roses
Have laden with perfume the air,
I plucked one, a queen among blossoms,
To give to my lady fair.
O rich red rose, twice blest, twice blest,
You were born to nestle against her breast.

She accepted it smiling divinely,
Then, casting the sweet eyes down,
With slim white fingers she fastened
My rose in the folds of her gown.
O rich red rose, twice blest, twice blest,
To rise and fall on so pure a breast.

V

She passed my window yester eve,
The sun was on her hair ;
There seemed new splendour in the day,
Fresh glory in the air.
She caroled lightly as she passed
Some snatch of melody,
Which borne upon the listening breeze
Has floated back to me.

She passed my window yester eve,
Her robe was purest white ;
One vast expanse of blue o'er-arched
A world of calm delight.
The sun, his moon-tide ardour spent,
Was drooping toward the west,
And as she passed my rose, my rose
Still nestled at her breast.

VI

At eventide we twain
Will tread the mazes of the solemn pines
Sweet-scented after rain.

I have her promise sweet
 Given, but not with that clear glance of hers
 Which quickens the heart's beat :

For lo ! to my surprise
 A shyness, sweet and strange, fluttered the lids
 Of her dear eyes,

But wherefore who can tell ?
 Perchance she caught a spark from that fierce flame
 Beneath the outer shell

Wherewith we shield from light
 The workings of the heart. But it may chance
 That, as I walk to-night,

With her sweet face so near,
 The tide of my deep passion in full flood
 Will burst the dam of fear.

VII

She is mine, she is mine ! I have won her for ever :
 no more
 Shall my heart be torn and my brain be racked by
 the devil of doubt.

Mine, mine; the fierce, wild rapture of conquest
thrills to my core,
Like the joy of a king who sees his enemy put to
the rout.

She is mine, she is mine: die down, fair day, blest
for ever thy name,
Day to be known and remembered with joy for
myriad years;
Sink to thy rest, blessed Sun, in thy glorious ocean
of flame,
For thou hast witnessed the death of my doubts
and my fears.

There in the wood where so oft heart and ear have
awaited her tread,
There where the burn 'mid the bracken danced and
bubbled like wine,
Full in her eyes I gazed till, raising the delicate
head,
She surrendered the warmth of her lips to the
passionate pressure of mine.

Bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh: one in name, one
in heart,
In one sweet current our blood shall flow on
through the valley of life.

Hasten, thou day of all days, shine brightly and do
not depart,
Till the holy rite in the village church hath made
her a wife.

God, from Thy heaven look down on the joy of Thy
creature to-night,
Take from me all that is base, make me worthy of
her I have won :
Grant that we twain hand in hand may walk in Thy
way, till the light
Of Thine own presence shall shine on us both, when
the journey is done.

VIII

The flush of dawn is creeping o'er the hills,
A thousand birds are twittering of the day,
The low of cattle echoes far away,
 The sky with radiance fills.

I stand without : within she lies asleep,
And from her casement opening on the lawn
The perfume of her presence greets the dawn,
 And makes my pulses leap.

Sleep on, fair soul ; let nothing break thy rest ;
Then rise refreshed to shed thy gracious light,
Until the sun, confessing thee more bright,
Sinks, vanquished, in the West.

FRENSHAM COMMON IN WINTER

A STRETCH of country open to the sky,
Like careful housewife, clad in homely brown,
Till summer bid her lay her prudence by
And don the splendour of her purple gown ;
Each mood and aspect of her—smile or frown—
I love, and I have climbed the little hill
That fronts the village inn, and gazing down
Have felt her solitary grandeur fill
My soul with wonder of a scene so calm and still.

I think I love her best in stormy tears,
When the tall pines, green-stockinged 'gainst the rain,
Sway, shuddering as with vague, unhappy fears,
Sighing and moaning in Titanic pain :
A wave of fear scuds quivering o'er the plain
Of heather sprigs : above, a leaden sky,
—It seems the sun will never shine again—
While steady, sibilant rain falls ceaselessly,
A weeping as of some immortal agony.

But see ! ere yet the short-lived day be fled
The struggling sun, triumphant but to die,

Hath pierced the sullen greyness overhead
To cheer the world, ere, sinking rapidly,
He dips behind the ridge. With gentle sigh
Murmur the winds. Large raindrops glitter on
The leaves, like unshed tears on maiden's eye,
Arrested by the smile so brave and wan
She turns her lover, as he clasps her and is gone.

And lastly let us climb the little hill
At noon : the sun strikes warm, though all the land
Is bound by frost: the winds are hushed and still.
Untiring sentinels, the pine trees stand
Staid, solemn, motionless : on either hand
Woodland and heath. Where'er the vision stray
The scene is simple, elemental, grand
In the deep stillness of a winter day——
And lo ! the City roar but forty miles away.

OBSESSION

DEAREST, thou wert not beautiful to me
When first we met, with speech conventional
—The well-worn currency of social use—
Thou who hast since put on such radiance
That I can make confession how thy soul
Shone clearer through the windows of thine
eyes

Whene'er they greeted me, and day by day
Some little unsuspected loveliness
Lurked in thy face—that half-reluctant smile
With shining eyes and lips that scarcely part
Save for the little lift that mars their line—
Mars? It hath grown so sweet as part of
thee

That I might kiss and kiss and never sate
My longing. Thou didst steal upon my soul
Like some elusive cadence, throbberingly
Repeated till when all the strings are mute
It yet vibrates within the enraptured ear
Surcharged with sweetness—all the mystery
Of those grey orbs and that calm, serious brow
Shaped to an arch by masses of dark hair . . .

Ah, my belovèd ! thou mayst smile secure
In knowledge that thy loveliness, new-born,
Hath cast a mist about the world and oped
The gates of heaven to one human soul.

THE DISCIPLE OF THOMAS HARDY

HE cares not for the city, core
 Of vast activities, the street
Pulsing with busy life, the roar
 Of ceaseless feet ;

Where fierce desire of private gains
 Corrodes the finer edge of Truth—
There, where the vampire City drains
 The blood of youth,

And men, who, void of pity, seek
 Their profit in another's fall—
Press onward, heedless of the weak
 Crushed to the wall—

For him the air of heaven, free
 From taint of smoke, the dim blue line
Of hills, the sighing of the sea
 In groves of pine,

The clean, white roads that stretch and wind
 Naked of traffic—all are part
Of that green country that hath twined
 About his heart.

He reads the heavens at a glance,
Experienced from their outward form
To know the signs and weigh the chance
Of sun or storm.

Nor lonely he : his little sphere
Is thronged by creatures of his brain,
Touched by his craft to smile or tear,
Passion or pain.

And he must search his heart, and brood
In silence, striving toward the goal—
To draw at length, if God be good,
A living soul,

And cause the children of the soil,
Their elemental love and hate
Breathe in the throbbing page,—their toil
And simple fate.

He gleans the secret of the earth,
And only counts as wholly nought
The day that hath not brought to birth
One noble thought.

Beyond his art he would not range
Though seasons each to other yield,
And year by year the colours change
In hedge and field.

50 THE DISCIPLE OF THOMAS HARDY

Give him a strip of English lawn,
The broad expanse of English sky,
And in an English summer dawn
Let him die.

THE LAST MONTH

STREAM flowing over the pebbles,
Dancing by meadow and tree,
Joining at length the great river,
Merging at last in the sea,
Tell me—thou prattlest of all things—
Is he still faithful to me?
Of course he is faithful . . . and yet
If he should chance to forget !

Swallow with delicate pinions
Wheeling thy flight through the air,
Darting now higher, now lower,
Doubling now here and now there,
Tell me—thou seëst all places—
Tell me, O does he still care ?
Surely he still cares . . . and yet
If he should chance to forget !

Sun sinking slowly to westward,
Flinging a rosier flame
Dying to purple, returning,
With the new day, whence it came.

Tell me—thou shonest on all things—

Will he come back—ere my shame?

He vowed he would wed me . . . and yet

O God, if he chance to forget!

LAZARUS

“ ‘ Where wert thou, brother, those four days ? ’
There lives no record of reply,
Which telling what it is to die
Had surely added praise to praise.”

—TENNYSON.

MARY, I sit beside thee as of old
Here in this chamber. Dearest one, I know
Thou art the same, yet scarce can realise
Aught of the present for my senses swoon
Before the vision of the fearful past.
For thou didst sit that night and watch me die,
I saw the anguish written on thy face
While thou didst tenderly with cool, light hand
Smooth back the ruffled hair from off my brow
Wet with the dews of death, and as I gazed
Thy face receded from me : I was 'ware
Of mighty rushing waters all around
Which seemed to close above me, and I sank
Deep, deep into a bottomless abyss,
Each fibre of my body seemed to split
And rend in dissolution. Suddenly
As from a height incomprehensible
I looked upon my body as it lay

Wrapped in the ghastly cerements of the dead.
This incorporeal essence of the soul,
Freed from the body's petty prison-house
Looked down, and understood the littleness
Of that new-shattered fastness. Then it seemed
My soul was caught and whirled, I know not where,
Backwards and forwards through infinities
Undreamed of in this world, whereon we dwell
Hedged round by the thick walls of ignorance.
And I was 'ware of whisperings, and shapes
That floated past, mysterious presences
Seen yet not seen, dim, vague and shadowy
As when, awaking from a dream, we strive
In vain once more to range before the eye
The unsubstantial images of sleep.
And some, methought, there were that beckoned me
With spectral fingers; otherwise gave faint cries
Of woe unspeakable: to me it seemed
The pent-up anguish of eternities
Struggled for utterance, and then there fell
A sudden, awful stillness: then, ah then—
No more: 'tis blotted out from my remembrance.
Thus I lay tranced, how long I may not know,
Until the first dim stirrings of a joy
Undreamed of filled my being, and I heard
Faint as the flitting sigh of babes in sleep
The whispering of the garments of the Christ,
And then his voice cried "Lazarus, come forth,"

And panting to be free my soul was whirled
Upward and ever upward to the Light.
Fierce exultation warred with the agony
Of a supreme convulsion, till I stood
Re-incarnate in The Presence, and I shrieked
As the full horror of a memory
Was borne on me, but His uplifted Hand
Was laid upon my brow, and at the touch
The pangs of Death were conquered : this I know,
Some deeper horror, now for ever lost,
Passed with His blessed touch upon my brow :
And He, methinks, hath left me some remembrance
Of what I suffered verily I believe
That I may lead a new and godly life
Warned by the solemn mysteries of Death.

O the wild joy of living ! with new lungs
To breathe the blessed air of God's own heaven ;
To feast the eye on foliage, and to smell
The perfume of the earth, drawn out by tears
Of rain which paint the herb a livelier green.
Into this frame, once cold in death, to draw
The concentrated essence of the sun,
The splendour of the shining eye of God,
To feel the life-blood riot through my veins
All through the loving mercy of the Christ.

BEFORE DAWN IN JUNE

THERE is a sense of dawn about the air,
And in the East a belt of glimmering light
Gives early promise of the waking sun.
The cold moon sinks yet lower : the bright stars
Pale into nothingness. A freshening breeze
Rustles the leaves and soothes the fevered brows
Of sleepers, tossing in the sullen heat
That all night simmered gently o'er the world.
The grey light slowly brightens in the East,
The herald of the dawn, while soft at first
But gathering volume, pour the liquid notes
Of some glad bird, and instantly the sound
Is caught, and echoed by a thousand throats
Till all the air vibrates with melody.
The distant low of cattle faintly falls
Upon the listening senses : one by one
The old familiar sounds of day are heard,
At last the conscious East begins to blush
Warmed by the first kiss of the risen sun.

EVENING

ALONE I sat and waited for the night
Till on the sun-kist mountains one bright ray
Lingered, then vanished with the dying day.
The distant peaks were slowly lost to sight
Looming through belts of ever-waning light :
With drowsy murmuring a rippling brook,
Half hidden from my view by a dense nook
Of clustering trees, pursued its lazy flight.
A tremulous breeze just stirred the languorous air
Irresolute, till, spread by God's own hand,
The shroud of falling night enwrapped the land :
In admiration of a scene so fair
Long time I gazed, then homeward took my way
Mourning the death of so divine a day.

MIDNIGHT

MIDNIGHT ! there is some subtle mystery
About this border hour of night and day
Which passes forward swiftly on its way :
Twelve light, sharp strokes have rung the short
hour by
And now 'tis morning : 'tis the instant birth
Of a new day upon the slumbrous earth,
For the old day hath faded silently,
Sinking in darkness to its quiet rest,
Following its sun into the distant West
To seek the couch where all the seasons die.
It is the hour when darkness seems most tense.
So silent is it, one may almost hear
Time's mighty engines throbbing in the ear,
Moulding the destiny of innocence.

THE CONFESSION

HE

HERE by the dying embers will we sit—
Our fingers twine—
Your chair a little back—'twill better fit
This tale of mine

That rises challenged by your purity :
Take back your hand
If, having heard, you shrink from me, for I
Shall understand.

Were you less spotless . . . vain imagining !
If that could be
You were not you. Ah, therein lies the sting
Of shame to me

Into whose tarnish'd soul you read your own
Virginity :
I feared to lose you if the truth were known—
Stood silent by,

But now your perfect faith commands me speak
Whate'er the cost—

Words are not easy . . . Dearest, I was weak,
Young, passion-toss'd,

And she with luring beauty drew me on,
Made me her thrall
By instinct for my mood—and I was won . . .
And—that is all—

Nay, 'tis not all, for doubly base were I
To shelter in
“The woman tempted me”—the earliest cry
Of primal sin—

The blame is mine who plunged into the net
That she had laid.

Past is the fleeting frenzy, but regret
Will never fade.

Your answer, dearest—tell me by your eyes
If love is dead . . .

Your fingers tighten . . . do you realise
All I have said ?

SHE

Belovèd—as you are and e'er shall be—
Not all unguessed

In my own heart this—trouble which to me
You have confessed,

Love hangs on little signs—oft would I think
From sudden glance
Or pause your tongue was trembling on the brink
Of utterance.

And she—that woman . . . peace ! what counts the
whole
World to us two ?
You, you I want, belovèd : all my soul
Cries out for you.

The past is blotted from my memory—
Yours, yours alone
Receive me. I surrender utterly.

He
Your lips, my own !

IN THE NIGHT WATCHES

THIS is the day she died :
A sullen sky has darkened into rain,
With tearing sobs of almost human pain
The wild wind weeps outside.

This is the day she died,
And this the chamber where she sank to rest,
Her white hands folded o'er the purest breast
For which a babe e'er cried.

For she, the truest wife
That ever bowed before her motherhood,
A week of suffering patiently withstood,
Then left a tiny life,

A pledge of my short spell
Of Paradise with her who lifted up
My soul, when that dark devil of the cup
Was luring it to Hell.

Yet when I saw the child
Soft, warm, alive but at such bitter cost
And mused on the white angel I had lost
My rebel heart reviled :

And when the infant wailed,
I, brooding on the havoc it had wrought
On her fair body, cursed it in my thought
And wept, and fiercely railed

Against the huckster, Death,
And that hard bargain which with me he drave
In snatching my beloved to the grave
Who yielded her sweet breath

To fan the tiny spark
Of life in the babe's bosom : empty gain
To bring into the world this child of pain :
Then came a time so dark,

When the full sense of loss
Was borne upon me by the vacant chair—
No tender, woman's sympathy to share
Each trivial joy or cross—

The fiend, with whom I strove
Of old, renewed his specious whispering,
Answered my soul, "Thou canst not do this thing,
For thou hast known her love."

The mocking voice replied :
" Fool, thou wert not uplifted, though she loved :
She was debased by thee : to anger moved
God smote her, that she died.

Turn thou again to me,
For I have set my seal upon thy face
Indelible : thou canst not take thy place
Once more among the free."

My soul again. "To such
As thou, fiend, Love would seem but empty lies,
All that is pure and true withers and dies
Polluted by thy touch.

And thou, despairing man,
Take courage : know that she that was thy wife,
God's emissary, came into thy life
To free it of the ban

Which daily drew thee lower.
Then God, His will performed, her mission spent,
Summoned her to His Throne, yet, ere she went,
She bare to thee this flower

To lift thee from the brute.
Nourish it carefully, lest any blight
Or vileness such as turned thy day to night
Should mar the perfect fruit."

At this high answer, sore
Abashed the fiend departed for a space,
Returned, but ever weaker by God's grace :
At length he came no more.

The years were born and died :
And Time, the wise physician, in his wake
Brought Resignation, lest my grief should break
A heart so sorely tried.

And she, my dear, my own,
To whom I felt so bitter at her birth,
Brings her sweet mother daily back to earth
By gesture, glance and tone.

Her chamber holds e'en now,
Removed from me by one dividing wall,
Her virgin bosom's rhythmic rise and fall ;
And, as athwart the snow

That clothes a wintry heath
A tree lies prone, her tresses kiss her breast,
While here a tendril quivers in unrest,
Fanned by her measured breath.

Dear heart, thy loveliness
Cannot be mine for ever : thou wilt wed,
And children with the features of the dead
Shall lisp for my caress.

In watches of the night
I muse, as now, on those once bitter days ;
Where is thy sting, O Death ? I yield the praise
To Him that sent me light.

To me the truth is clear
That in his wisdom infinite, God, who knew
Earth could not hold the sweetness of the two,
Left her, the daughter, here

And sent pale Death to free
The spirit of the mother. Be he late
Or early in his coming, I await
His summons patiently.

THE SONG OF THE PROPHETS OF BAAL

"And they took the bullock which was given them and they dressed it and called on the name of Baal from morning even until noon, saying: 'O Baal, hear us.' But there was no voice nor any that answered. And they leaped upon the altar which was made" (1 Kings xviii. 26).

"And they cried aloud and cut themselves after their manner with knives and lancets till the blood gushed out upon them" (ver. 28).

"And it came to pass when mid-day was past and they prophesied until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice that there was neither voice nor any to answer nor any that regarded" (ver. 29).

I

O BAAL, hear us, hear us as we cry,
And from on high
Send down Thy fire upon our humble sacrifice.

Behold a jet black bullock we have ta'en,
For Thee have slain,
And see ! upon Thine altar dressed the victim lies

Young, tender, without blemish, without spot,
Whose blood, yet hot,
Is duly sprinkled round the sacrificial pyre.

68 SONG OF THE PROPHETS OF BAAL

Hear us Thy servants calling on Thy name,
Descend in flame,
Wreathing Thy Godhead in a cloud of fierce-
consuming fire.

II

Hear us, O Baal, we call to Thee, hear us, O Baal.
Harken Omnipotent, Terrible, Mighty One, Lord
of the earth,
Lo ! on the summit of Carmel Thy prophets call ever
upon Thee—
We that are dust in Thine eyes, Great Ruler of
Death and of Birth.

Hear us, O Baal, look down upon Israel gathered
together,
Tribe upon tribe to the honour and glory of Him
they adore :
List to the voice of a people, O turn not Thy
countenance from us,
Visit thine altar with flame for a sign Thou art
God evermore.

Wilt thou not hear us, O Baal ? the valleys re-echo
our wailing,
See, at the base of thine altar the blood of the
victim is dry.

Tremulous, panting, importunate—Baal, have mercy upon us,
Lo ! 'tis the heart of a nation ascends in our dolorous cry.

Have we offended unknowing, unwitting provoked
Thee to anger ?

Gaze on the pastures of Israel teeming with creatures of Thine—

Rivers of blood for Thy bathing, if only Thou send us, O Baal,

Flame as a token of pardon : O grant us a sign.

III

Hear us, O Baal.

Why dost Thou turn from us ?

Why art thou deaf

To the voice of our agony ?

Art thou athirst

For the streams of our being ?

Behold, from our bodies

The bright blood is flowing—

Taste of it, drink of it,

Hear us, O Baal.

Hear us, O Baal.

Wilt thou endure

To be mocked and despised
 By a stranger, a prophet
 Of one that we know not ?
 O Mighty Avenger,
 Ineffable Majesty,
 Haste, in Thine anger
 Descend and destroy him.

Mercy, O Baal !
 Fainting with weariness,
 Maddened by thirst—
 Parched are our lips
 As the sand of the desert.
 Blood ? It is gushing
 In rivers of crimson,
 Bathe in it, drink of it,
 Hear us, O Baal !

IV

Wilt thou not hear us, pitiless in Thy cruelty ?
 Hear us, O Baal, Thy people murmur against Thee—
 Carmel running with gore as it were a slaughter of
 soldiery.
 Ah, have a care, cruel God ! with fury a nation is
 smouldering.
 Hear us, or Israel goaded to madness will trample
 Thine images,

Dash to the ground Thine altar, leave no stone on another—
We Thy prophets be put to the sword by a people infuriate.

V

Hear us, O Baal, we cry,
Faintly we call unto Thee,
Wilt thou not grant us a sign ?

Here in the gathering gloom
Kindle the flame of Thy wrath,
Lighting the city beneath.

VI

Lo ! we are swooning and dying for loss of the blood that hath glutted the lust of Thy craving, Swollen and black are the clamorous tongues that have pleaded in vain to the God of their worship,
Out of the confident army whose voices vibrated and thrilled through the air of the morning Naught but a handful remaining to totter and stumble in agony, whispering hoarsely.
Hear us, O Baal, the prophet of Him that we know not is mocking our desperate wailing,

72 SONG OF THE PROPHETS OF BAAL

Hear us, O Baal, Thy people are menacing, muttering,
murmuring wildly against Thee ;
Hear us, O Baal, O Baal behold ! we are goaded to
madness, o'erdriven by cruelty, hear or we curse
Thee.

THE OFFERTORY

DEAREST, I offer you love ;
 Take it, my sweet, 'tis your due ;
 Take all my life with it too,
 Take, then, my love.

Here is your hand in the gloom—
 Frail little hand that I fold
 In mine, yet strong to uphold
 The life of a man.

Why do I love ? do you ask
 Wherein my tenderness lies ?
 I can see God in your eyes,
 Dearest and best.

UNDER PROMISE OF MARRIAGE

I GAVE you all I had,
 My maidenhead,
You plucked, enjoyed, then cast aside
 The flower——dead.

’Twas such an easy thing
 For you : and I ?
What consolation for my loss,
 What remedy ?

To drag my shame before
 A gaping crowd ?
To hear your words, once sacred,
 Read aloud

By him, my hireling, paid
 To twist and turn
Even Love’s language to advance
 My cause, and earn

For me the paltry dole
 The law allows
To balance tarnished honour, love in ashes,
 Broken vows ?

No, no a thousand times :
 Never for me
The gold that would have smoothed our path
 In unity.

No dross from you shall rear
 The child of sin,
Eve's curse is mine, but not the crown of joy
 My sisters win

Who, bound by that sweet oath
 In Cana sworn,
Forget their travail, raptured by the thought
 “ A man is born.”

For me the whispered word,
 The sidelong glance,
Even more deadly and more eloquent
 Than utterance.

But you the world will hold
 Scarcely to blame,
The chatter of the clubs will lightly play
 About your name.

“ No doubt she led him on,
 Met him half-way——”
O God ! the men escape the penalty,
 The women pay.

Why not one law for both,
One social code?

The woman errs for ever: and the man?—
A wild oat sowed,

No more: so thinks the world.

Men spurn aside
The hound that rolls in mire, yet, foul themselves,
Demand a bride

Of icy chastity,
Untrodden snow:
Are you, I wonder, such an one as these,
And will you go

To some pure, spotless girl,
And, void of shame,
Give to her—what you never gave to me—
The shelter of your name?

Fool that I was to yield
To your strange spell,
Anticipate my heaven——realize
My Hell.

I deemed you soul of truth:
You could not go
Back on your word: too trusting? yes——but then
I loved you so.

And when the letter came
In which you strove
To clothe in paraphrase a simple truth,
The death of love,

My soul, her moorings broken,
Tossed about
This way and that, like to a helmless barque
Upon the sea of doubt.

You thought to cast aside
A broken toy—
You and your type can scarcely realize
That you destroy

A woman's life, her faith
In God, and wake
The devil ever sleeping in her breast
That bids her slake

Unholy thirsts, and add
One more recruit
To London's nightly regiment of shame,
Or taste her Dead Sea fruit

In loftier spheres of vice
Less openly—
Enough. That horror, by the grace of God,
Has passed me by.

78 UNDER PROMISE OF MARRIAGE

The child and I will go
To some retreat
Where, as a widow—God will pardon me
The slight deceit—

I may win love, respect,
The means of grace,
And this my earnest prayer that I no more
May look upon thy face.

THE POET'S THREE MASTERS

LISTLESS upon his couch the Poet lay
Wrapped in a waking trance ; the moonless night
Died slowly Eastward, and the winds were still.
And lo, as he lay tranced a Vision bright
As Summer sun at noon which dazzled him
With its effulgence ! when his blinded eyes
Resumed their office he beheld a child
With hair of streaming gold, and o'er his head
A halo shone, then disappeared and shone
Again with brighter glory. “ Who art thou ? ”
The Poet cried : with gentle smile the boy
Made answer, “ I am he that men call Hope,
For I am with thee day and night unseen,
Yet sometimes dost thou catch a glimpse of me
When thy sweet songs, polished with loving care,
Summon approval from the lips of men,
And oftentimes fade I utterly, when thy lyre,
Which thou wast wont to smite in ecstasy,
Till its rich harmonies engulfed the air,
Gives forth a wretched tinkle to thine ear
Fearful of discord : but lift up thy heart,
My light is but eclipsed by such dark hours,

Not hid from thee for ever." As he spake
Hope sudden vanish'd : slowly died the night,
And from the utter stillness rose a sound,
The whirr of distant wings in act of flight.
We hear it nigh the dawn when all the winds
Lie tranced, and marvel at it, knowing not
It is the whisper of the wings of Love
Flitting from soul to soul. The Poet heard
And wondered : then, as nearer throbbed the sound,
A mighty pulse vibrated through the air.
Something of fear knocked at the Poet's heart,
Followed by mystic, languorous delight
Yielding to fiercer rapture. He beheld
A woman clothed in beams of rosy light
Whose features, dimly beautiful, escaped
His clearer vision. "Who art thou?" he cried.
Then issuing from her misty loveliness
A voice of rarest cadence made reply,
Thrilling his inmost soul. "My name is Love,
Hereafter shalt thou see my face, but now
I am to thee a vision glorious,
Yearned for in secret, dreamed of in the night,
Fashioned in fancy—eyes and lips and hair—
Yet all a mirage : but a day will dawn
—Early or late alone my Master knows—
When I shall stand revealed for evermore
In the clear mirror of a maiden's eyes,
And in thy passion thou shalt sweep the strings

In deeper and more tremulous ecstasy
Till thy rich notes, vibrating through the air,
Shall thrill the souls of men, for with mine aid
Thou shalt achieve unutterable things.
I go : yet seek me not with diligence,
Keep pure thy heart, and all unasked I come.
Farewell." The vision faded, and the mist
Flowed through the open casement and was lost.
Then as he lay the Poet chilled, and fell
From exaltation, like to one whom wine
Of rarest vintage raises to the heights
Then dashes earthwards, when the magic draught
Hath spent its virtue. 'Twas the moment tense,
Heavy, expectant, ere the birth of day
Is by His creatures chorused up to God.
A sudden breeze, so faint it scarce might stir
The aspens from their sleep, yet strangely chill
Caressed the Poet's brow : he seemed to feel
Cold fingers at his heart. He raised his eyes
To meet a Figure draped in sable shroud,
Nor sound nor motion broke the awful calm.
"Speak, who art thou?" he whispered with white
lips.

Slow from the gloom came answer, "I am Death,
This hour is mine : I come before the dawn
Lest weary souls should see another day
Rise on their pain. Those in the joy of youth
Quail at my breath chill-wafted as I pass

To claim some well-belovèd of their blood
And lift wild hands against God's messenger,
Forgetting I shall soon appear to them
Benign and peaceful. Dearly loved of thine
Shall feel my icy kiss upon their lips.
But when thine early stupor yields to Time,
My Brother, then I chasten, making thy song
Clearer and purer through adversity.
Last will I come for thee, and thou shalt pass,
Yet may thy song defy me, if thou write
To God's dictation, scorning to blaspheme
His holy utterance with words of thine
Attuned to catch the grosser ear of man.
Farewell until the day I come for Thee."

Death faded, and the trance was broken through ;
And rising from his couch the Poet watched
The stately elms loom greener, standing out
More clearly 'gainst the slowly brightening East,
While from their branches brake the triumph song.
"Hope, Love and Death," he cried, "have I beheld,
Three Masters of my craft. Hope have I known,
Love have I yearned for, and have quailed at Death.
Yet each of them shall point me some fresh truth
To weave into my song in years to come
Till Death, the Final Master, bids me cease."

THE FAREWELL OF LANCELOT AND GUINEVERE

(FROM AN UNPUBLISHED DRAMA)

SCENE.—*The guest chamber in a convent at Ambresbury in Wiltshire. Doors on L. and at back*

Enter at back the ABBESS and LANCELOT

ABBESS

And so, Sir Knight, thou dost desire to hold
Speech with this novice who so lately sought
And found admission to our sisterhood ?

LANCELOT

Yea, madam : of thy courtesy I pray
Lead me to her that we may hold converse

ABBESS

Thy name ?

LANCELOT

My name ? Must I, then, tell my name ?

ABBESS

Yea, of thy grace, for so our rules demand.

LANCLOT

My name is—Lancelot.

ABBESS

Thou . . . Sir Lancelot—

And she—and she?

LANCLOT

She is—Queen Guinevere.

ABBESS

Ah, Heaven, and art thou come to work on her,
To lure her hence with specious promises
And drag her back to shame? Dost thou not know
Her sin and thine is blazoned o'er the world
That thou com'st hither, shameless in thy shame,
Deeming thine infamy within these walls
Unknown, to thine unworthy purposes
Shaping our fancied ignorance?

LANCLOT

God knows

I merit thy reproaches—every word—
For what is past, but, madam, I am come
To seek the Queen and bind her fast to me
In bonds of Holy Church before the world.
Thus may we make atonement for our sin.

ABBESS

Atonement? Ay, perchance in the eyes of men,
But in the eyes of God . . . ? It may be best.
We do not hold a novice 'gainst her will . . .
How may I know, e'en though she yield to thee,
That thou wilt wed her?

LANCELOT

Dost thou doubt my word?

(Sadly) Alas! It is no marvel if my sin
Hath maimed my credit. If the Queen consent
Then let a priest be summoned, and thyself
A witness, he shall make us truly one
By all observances and holy rites.

[*The ABBESS considers a moment, then claps her hands twice.*

Enter a Nun

ABBESS

Child, wilt thou send the novice late arrived
Hither to me on the instant?

NUN

Mother, I go.

[*The NUN goes out on L.*

ABBESS

Sir Lancelot, thou shalt see her; I will touch
 No more upon the past—that is for God
 And not for me to weigh. It seems that I
 Have done thee wrong, endued thy purposes
 With unimagined baseness, for the which
 I ask thy pardon.

LANCELOT

Madam, 'twas not strange
 Thou should'st mistrust me, for my way of life
 Hath forfeited my fame.

ABBESS

I do not think
 Thou shalt prevail, for all her hopes are based
 On silent meditation, ceaseless prayer,
 Untiring vigil, and her soul is fed
 By fasting of the flesh. Behold, she comes!

*[The ABBESS advances towards the door on
 L., by which enter GUINEVERE in
 the garb of a novice. The ABBESS
 takes her arm.]*

GUINEVERE

Mother, thou would'st have speech of me?

ABBESS

My child—

GUINEVERE

(*Seeing LANCELOT*) Lancelot ! Mother of Heaven !

[*She falls back into the ABBESS' arms in a half swoon. The ABBESS signing to LANCELOT to retire up stage, he does so.*

What brings him here ?

Thou knowest . . . ? Nay, thou canst not, else thine arm

Had never twined about me. I am she
Who wrought such——

ABBESS

Peace, my daughter ! I know all,
And therefore hold thee closer. He is come
With that which must be said to thee alone.
Courage ! I shall be near thee—within hail.

GUINEVERE

(*Clinging to the ABBESS*) Ah, do not leave me !

ABBESS

(*Gently disengaging herself*) I shall be so near.

[*Exit ABBESS on L.*

[*LANCELOT comes down stage and stands before GUINEVERE : a moment of silence.*

GUINEVERE

Why art thou come to trouble my repose
 Flooding my heart with memories ?

LANCELOT

Guinevere,

Word of that last grim battle in the West
 Had scaled ere now these ancient convent walls.
 Arthur is dead. Strange rumours of his end
 Are blown about the world—a mystic barge
 Wherein 'midst weeping Queens he passed away
 Whither, who knows?—wild tales are ever rife
 In that disruption wrought by the death of kings.
 Arthur is dead : I saw him ere the end,
 When naught might staunch his wound, and solemnly
 He laid on me this charge, to bind myself
 To thee in holy wedlock. Guinevere,
 By all the saints I conjure thee—

GUINEVERE

No more !

Why hast thou broken in upon my peace ?
 Why art thou come, uprooting from my heart
 With ruthless hand this tender shoot of Hope
 Planted by God and watered with such tears
 As Mary showered upon the feet of Christ ?
 Why com'st thou hither, shattering with a glance

The wall which I had built 'twixt thee and me,
Each stone a prayer wrung from my tortured
soul?

O with what painful and laborious steps
I trudged the daily path to grace—and now
The sight of thee, thou partner of my shame,
Awakes the awful voice that cries to heaven,
“Guinevere, thou art stained for evermore.
Seek not salvation: vain are all thy hopes.”
O, by the passion that consumed us twain
And wrought such woe I charge thee, get thee
hence
That I may look upon thy face no more!

LANCELOT

God knows I sinned in loving Arthur's Queen,
But Arthur is no more, and though his death
Was hastened through my sin, yet thou art free,
Come, let us make amends for what is past,
And after decent interval, ere yet
The year of thy noviciate be sped
Unite us in the bonds of Holy Church——

GUINEVERE

That we whose guilty passion slew the King
Should profit by his death, gloss o'er our sin,
Clutch at salvation through the sacred vows
Ordained by Holy Church for virgin souls!

What sacrifice were this, what offering
To lay before the Throne?

LANCELOT

O Guinevere,
'Twas Arthur's dying wish that we should wed.
Has that no force to work upon thy soul,
Battle thy scruples, woo thee to consent?
Not yet hast thou embraced the final vows . . .
At last shalt thou and I be truly one,
And Time with slow, obliterating hand
Shall blur this horror that besets thy soul,
And we shall dwell at peace with God and man,
Each all-sufficient in the other's eyes.

GUINEVERE

Nay, nay, it could not be. How alien
Were the cold marble of reality
To this impetuous fiction of thy brain
Born of the moment, fathered by desire.
Ah, when the fire was dying from mine eye,
And ruthless Time had scored upon my brow
The chequered tracery of relentless years,
Death warrant of my youth, dumb testimony,
Then daily should I wake in terror, gaze
With pitiful intentness on thy face,
Dreading the soulless tolerance of those eyes
Which once had flamed to mine. For, Lancelot, thou

Didst love me for perfection of my form,
My faultless flesh—accursèd heritage
Of women when they wed not with the soul.
And thou would'st loathe me, beautiful no more,
Chafe at the bonds that held thee fast to me
Who waded to thine arms through Arthur's blood . . .
(*More quietly and sadly*) No child was born of me unto
the King—

No kiss of velvet lips about my breast,
No little helpless hands whereon our own
Might clasp in that vast tenderness which comes
Of deeper understanding . . . tiny hands,
Yet strong enough to thrust *thee* from my side . . .
How often, turning suddenly my head,
I found on me the sad and pensive gaze
Of Arthur. He would look away and sigh.
And I, to whom each glance was dumb reproach,
Assailed the Blessèd Virgin with wild prayers,
Scarring with bitter, unavailing tears
My midnight couch—yet never babe of me
That might have held me faithful to the King.
(*More wildly*) Now he is dead, and it is thou and I
Have slain him! O, thy face brings back to me
That awful night at Camelot of doom
And blood and terror—Modred—Arthur's death.

[*She shudders, covering her face with her
hands : then bursts forth :*

Hence! Get thee gone! O leave me with my dead!

LANCELOT

Guinevere, Guinevere, whither shall I go?
Must I endure, so utterly alone
To drag my life out, haunted evermore
By pale, accusing spectres of dead knights—
This life of mine which thou hast filled to the brim
With the rare vintage of thy loveliness?
I cannot leave thee. Pity my despair—
Guinevere!

GUINEVERE

Is it easy, thinkest thou,
For me to hear the music of thy voice
In wild entreaty—then to bid thee go
Out of my life for ever? Press me no more,
Thou shalt not shake me from my firm resolve
Wound me no further.

LANCELOT

Is there then no hope
On earth for me? My last appeal . . . Ah, once
I had not pled in vain!

GUINEVERE

That hour is past
For ever. I am bride of Holy Church,
And I with tears, with fastings, and with prayer
Must purge away those years of sin with thee

But thou—go forth into the world, and seek
Some high-souled maid and wed her, for thy sin
To mine was light, and pray thou for my soul
As I for thine. Farewell.

LANCELOT

O Guinevere——

GUINEVERE

Help me a little—make it not too hard.
Come.

[*She leads him to the door at back. He turns and takes both her hands.*

LANCELOT

I have failed—then—Guinevere?

GUINEVERE

Thou hast failed.

LANCELOT

O light and wine and glory of my life,
I, who on earth have won and lost my Heaven,
Unwillingly surrender thee to God.
Since thou, the flaming sun of all my hopes,
Art set in this calm sea of penitence
And prayer, I, too, will take on me the vows.
No maid shall call me lord, for thou long since

With one sweet glance unpeopled all the world
Of women in mine eyes. Farewell . . . Farewell.

[*They stand gazing at each other for a moment, then LANCELOT goes out. GUINEVERE stands motionless, then cries, "Mother! Mother!" The ABBESS enters, and GUINEVERE falls weeping into her arms. From without is heard a chorus of nuns chanting in unison.*

ABBESS

(Gently) Vespers, my child. Strengthen thy heart
with prayer.

Come.

[*The ABBESS leads GUINEVERE off on L.*

THE END

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